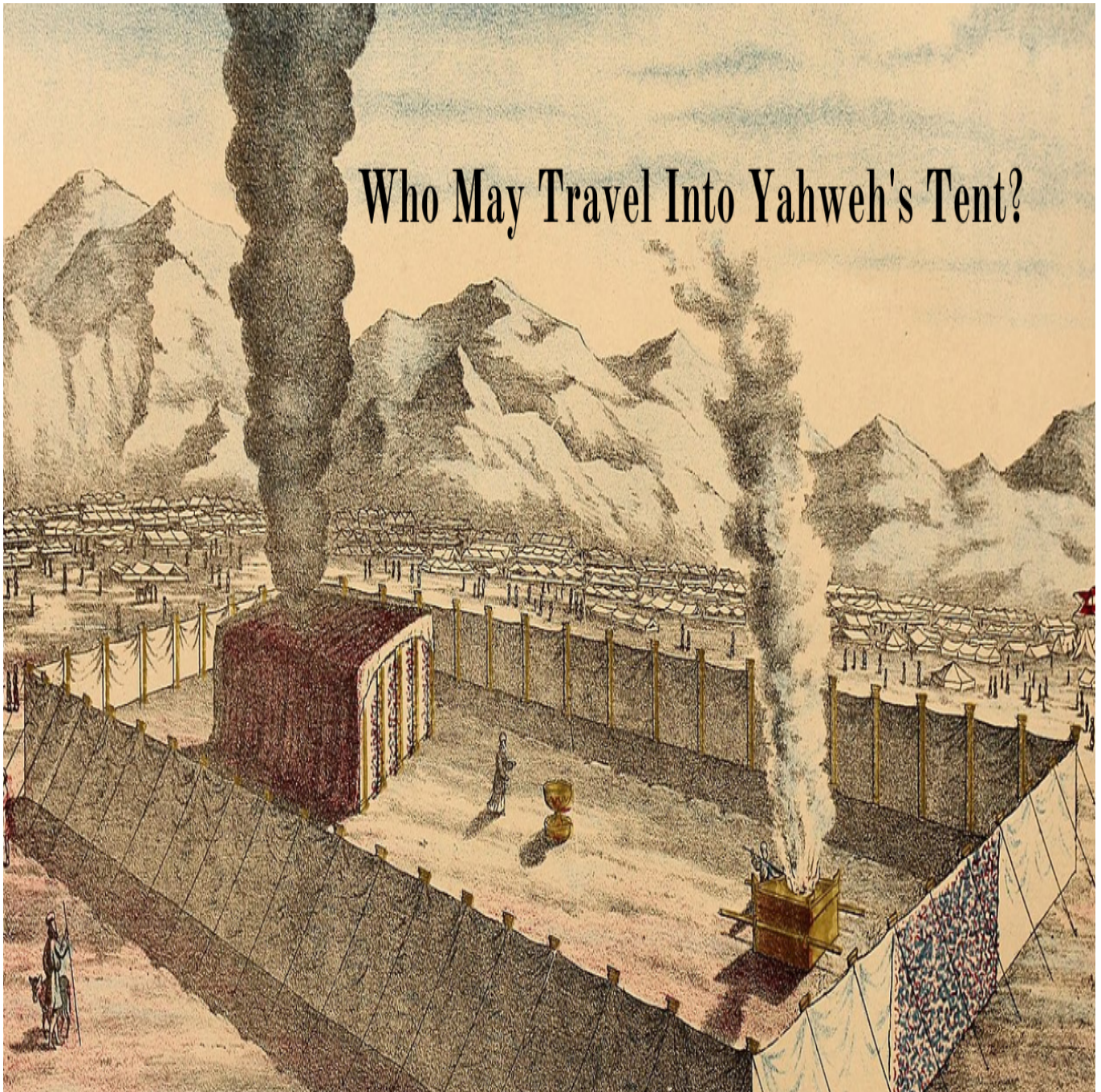


Who May Travel Into Yahweh's Tent?

Description



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I've recently been writing about a philosophy within ancient Israel that understood Yahweh to be the God of Truth and truth itself to be the supreme principle. This was actually part of the

materialist school in ancient Israel. If you aren't familiar with ancient Israelite materialism, I recommend reading/listening to the series of seven articles/podcasts mentioned in [our last post](#).

Most would agree that truth is whatever corresponds to reality, but since people don't agree on the basic nature of reality, different people think different things merit the label "truth." For example, most people think reality includes a non-physical realm, and most people have religious beliefs about this non-physical realm and they, of course, think their beliefs are true. But for a materialist, the only reality is material reality and so the only beliefs and propositions that can be true are those that match material reality. The materialist school in Ancient Israel quite naturally had a materialistic understanding of truth. And this was no trivial thing. As I already mentioned, they held truth to be the supreme principle. All claims are tested against the standard of material reality. For an example of a practical implication of this, this understanding of truth is at the root of the Israelite objection to idolatry. Idolaters claimed that an essence or spirit of a deity entered the idol, but Israelite materialists said the idol is nothing but stone or wood or metal or whatever it was made of. They believed everything is nothing more than the material that comprises it organized into some configuration. Since there is *physically* nothing in an idol besides its base materials, they believed that there is, *in fact*, nothing in an idol besides its base materials. And they applied this reasoning to a whole lot besides idols, as we covered in previous episodes.

Another area of application for this way of thinking is morality. Since material reality is the standard for all claims, it must also be the standard for moral claims. So... there developed in this materialist school of Ancient Israel, a system of morality that was overtly truth-based. And those who advanced this way of thinking praised Yahweh as righteous and as the God of Truth because Yahweh spoke truth and acted according to truth. Plus, it was, after all, Yahweh who, through his prophets, taught them the principles of truth and truth-based morality.

This way of understanding and relating to a deity is very different from how most did it in the ancient world. In this post, I'll be going through some of the differences between this ancient Israelite philosophy and ancient religions in general, and we'll look at an Israelite poem that exemplifies some of these differences.

Let's start with the fact that ancient religions were primarily based on transactional relationships with deities. Humans cared for deities by upkeeping their temples and offering sacrifices and, in return, the deity would ensure the continued operation of the aspects of nature over which they exercised dominion. For example, Ra would keep the sun rising and shining each day, and Dagon would keep the grain growing. In these systems, deities didn't really care about what people believed and or about the moral standing of their actions. So long as humans kept providing for the gods, the gods would provide for the humans.

In keeping with this, if someone wanted to enter a temple, whether to petition a god, to partake of a feast, or for some other purpose, the conditions for admission had nothing to do with beliefs or morality and instead had everything to do with performing actions that in one way or another cared for the gods. One aspect of this was avoiding certain things that might bring ritual defilement into the deity's house. The person might have to do ritual purifications in order to ensure this. Another aspect was to present offerings to the deity – often grain, beverages, and slaughtered animals. These sorts of requirements were par for the course for anyone who wanted to enter into an area consecrated for a deity in the ancient world. This was true of pagan religions, and (as you might

be aware) this was true for many in ancient Israel as well. And again, just to make this as clear as possible, the requirements for entering an area consecrated to a deity had nothing to do with morality and truth; instead, they had to do with standard rituals that were understood as caring for the deity.

Yet, those who understood Yahweh as the God of Truth had a very different system. This is where that ancient Israelite poem I mentioned comes in. The first line reads:

“Yahweh, who may travel into your tent?
Who may dwell in the mountain of your consecration?”

The answer most ancient people would expect would be something like this:

Only he who is free from ritual impurity, whose skin is free from infection, and whose bodily fluids remain within him. Whoever has been defiled must purge his impurity before approaching the sanctuary. And whoever enters must present a grain offering and a drink offering and sacrifice a lamb or a goat or a bull.

It's just a reality that rituals like what I just described were precisely what most temples and places of worship required. But this poem, as we'll see, sets forth completely different requirements for admission.

I'll read the whole thing in a moment, but before I do, I just want to mention one quick thing about the pronouns. The poem uses masculine pronouns for the hypothetical person, and while it's true that treating masculine language as the default probably does reflect the patriarchal structure of society, it would be simply incorrect to assume that the use of masculine pronouns by a particular author indicates a gender exclusive or male-centric intention on the part of that author. The use of masculine language in Ancient Hebrew was generic and was gender inclusive unless it appeared in a context in which it was contrasted with feminine language. This means that while the language itself has a masculine bias, the users of the language could communicate gender-inclusive messages in spite of that male bias. Since this poem doesn't contrast masculine terms with feminine terms, the masculine pronouns are generic and are thus gender-inclusive. Also, I should mention that in my comments on the poem, I follow its language to some extent in order to make it easy to relate my comments to the poem, but in doing so, my use of masculine pronouns should also be understood as applying to anyone regardless of gender. With that said, here's the poem:

“Yahweh, who may travel into your tent?
Who may dwell in the mountain of your consecration?”

A consummate goer
and a producer of right
and a speaker with truth in his heart.

He hasn't footed upon his tongue,
he hasn't done bad to his friend,
and a taunt he hasn't lifted upon his neighbor.

A despisee in his eyes is rejected,
and fearers of Yahweh he substantiates.

He's sworn himself to be treated badly and he doesn't exchange.
His silver he hasn't given at interest.
And a bribe against the innocent he hasn't taken.

A doer of these things – he'll not be toppled for ineffable time."

Clearly, this poem understands the conditions for entering into Yahweh's space to be moral and, even more specifically, to be rooted in truth. The poem doesn't dispense with conditions, but it gives conditions far more congruent with what would be logically required in order to dwell with a God of Truth.

To understand this poem's vision of ritual purity (that is, fitness for sacred space), let's briefly look at its parts.

Usually, people would call this a "psalm," and it is, but it's important to understand that psalms are poems, and what makes something poetry is the use of various linguistic structures that are more, in some ways, more restrictive than in non-poetic language. This psalm follows certain patterns that are characteristic of Hebrew poetry. It's divided into several sections, and each section focuses on an idea expressed through several parallel lines called parallelisms. Let's take each section one at a time:

Section 1

"Yahweh, who may travel into your tent?
Who may dwell in the mountain of your consecration?"

This is the opening question to which the following sections provide the answer. I say "question" in the singular since the two questions here are one in idea. They both express the same basic thought, albeit with different nuances. This is simply the way Hebrew poetry works. Some refer to it as "rhyming ideas" rather than rhyming sounds. Technically, what we have here is known as a "synonymous parallelism." Asking Yahweh "who may travel into your tent?" is roughly the same as asking him, "who may dwell in the mountain of your consecration?" At the same time, a subsequent line in a synonymous parallelism doesn't merely repeat the previous line in different words; it develops the idea a little further. In this case, the first line refers to the traveler's act of entering while the second line refers to the person having already entered and now dwelling. In both cases, however, the question is the same: Who is fit to enter the area consecrated for Yahweh's?

You may have also noticed that “Yahweh’s tent” is parallel to “the mountain of Yahweh’s consecration.” Both of these expressions refer to the place that has been devoted for Yahweh to reside in. It is Yahweh’s local habitation, and the assumption is that not just anyone in any condition can enter. I’m sure you wouldn’t let literally anyone enter your home no matter their behavior or state of being. There are conditions. The same is true for Yahweh’s home. So, what are the conditions? The answer begins in

Section 2

“A consummate goer
and a producer of right
and a speaker with truth in his heart.”

Again, these three lines each express different aspects of one unified idea. One who is consummate in all that he does *is* a producer of right (he acts rightly) and *is* one who has truth in his heart and speaks it. And take note, Ancient Israelites understood the heart to be the organ of intellect; they didn’t use the heart as a metaphor for emotion as we do today. So, the psalmist is saying that the person *understands* truth and speaks truth. Also, since the poem places in synonymous parallel lines being a speaker of truth and being a producer of right, it’s clear that the psalmist saw truth and right behavior as two sides of the same coin, which indicates that the psalmist was of the school of thought that held to truth-based morality. It’s also clear that the psalmist is saying that the requirements for entering Yahweh’s sacred space include, first and foremost, being someone who thinks and speaks and acts according to truth. And again, keep in mind the contrast between this and the typical requirements for entering sacred spaces. Okay,

Section 3

“He hasn’t footed upon his tongue,
he hasn’t done bad to his friend,
and a taunt he hasn’t lifted upon his neighbor.”

These three lines again express different aspects of one central idea. This time, it’s about what must be *avoided* by one who wishes to dwell in Yahweh’s mountain. To “foot upon one’s tongue” is an expression not too different from “putting your foot in your mouth,” but the image is more extreme. Another Israelite psalm portrays the wicked as setting their mouth against the skies while their tongue goes on the ground (you can read this in Ps. 73:9). The idea is that those who talk arrogantly have enlarged tongues and are prone to stepping on them. But this isn’t the case for a lover of truth. The sort of person described in this poem – the person fit to enter Yahweh’s space – doesn’t do bad to his friend or taunt his neighbor. While all sorts of bad are encompassed in the middle line, the section as a whole is clearly focused on the bad that is done through speaking.

Section 4

“A despisee in his eyes is rejected,
and fearers of Yahweh he substantiates.”

Here again the lines are parallel, but this time they express contrasting elements. The first line

speaks of how one fit to enter Yahweh's tent relates to wrongdoers while the second line speaks of how he relates to rightdoers. A despisee (one who is despised) is set in contrasting parallel with "fearers of Yahweh." This indicates that the despisee *doesn't* fear Yahweh – he lacks a sense of the formidableness of the God of Truth, and he thus acts without regard for truth. His condition is thus truly despicable. A follower of truth simply can't befriend such a one, for how can two walk together who operate by such different principles? The follower of truth sees things as Yahweh, the God of Truth, sees things, and thus despises what He (Yahweh) despises and rejects what He (Yahweh) rejects; namely, all that is contrary to truth and righteousness.

But a truth-lover can relate differently to those who do fear Yahweh. As the poem says, he "substantiates" them. The term translated "substantiates" is quite broad and can mean different things in different contexts. It can mean to provide substance for them, or it can mean to show their ways and their words to be substantial. Those who fit themselves for Yahweh's dwelling by truth and righteousness will doubtless substantiate each other in manifold ways. Alright,

Section 5

"He's sworn himself to be treated badly and he doesn't exchange.
His silver he hasn't given at interest.
And a bribe against the innocent he hasn't taken."

These three parallel lines again express different aspects of one central idea – the lover of truth will act for the benefit of others, without self-interest. He puts himself in a position where he knows he'll be treated badly (uncompromisingly following truth tends to do that in this world), yet he doesn't let the poor treatment he receives influence him to exchange his lot for the more comfortable life of compromise.

The last two lines about not charging interest and not taking bribes also emphasize behavior that is fundamentally uninterested in gaining the advantage.

And again, the point is that only a person who embodies these principles is permitted to enter Yahweh's space. How unlike the typical requirements of ancient religions! Lastly, we have

Section 6

"A doer of these things – he'll not be toppled for ineffable time."

The content of the sections between the first section and this last one answers the initial question of the poem. This last section is an expression of this fact and a conclusion. The one who does all the things expressed in sections 2-5 will not be toppled (fall down) but will instead be a successful traveler to Yahweh's tent. And so long as he is a doer of truth and righteousness, he'll be able to continue his consummate goings and enter Yahweh's tent again and again from time to time, and do so for ineffable time.

So, who may travel into Yahweh's tent? Who may dwell in the mountain of his consecration? Well, according to this poem, a truth-loving rightdoer. This is rooted in the understanding of Yahweh as the God of Truth, and it assumes the system of truth-based morality. Yahweh not only promotes true ideas, but Yahweh conforms His behavior to truth. And naturally, he requires the same of his

followers. Ancient religions required people to perform certain rituals and make certain sacrifices in order to enter sacred space, and anyone who met those requirements could enter, regardless of whether or not they thought, spoke, and acted according to truth. Again, this was the case for ancient pagan religions and it was the case even for many ancient Israelites. But some ancient Israelites had a very different understanding, as we can see in this poem. Here, Yahweh will admit into his sacred space whoever thinks, speaks, and acts according to truth. *These* are the conditions, *not* the typical ritual and sacrificial demands. The God of Truth wants truth and truthful behavior. This was so unlike the ancient religions that it's worth questioning whether it makes sense to think of it as one of the ancient religions. But partly that's just a matter of how we define our terms. But it's fair to say that if it's a religion, it's a philosophical religion, and if it's a philosophy, it's a divine philosophy.

Now that the poem has been explicated, it's worth reading again and hopefully, the point will stand out even more plainly:

"Yahweh, who may travel into your tent?
Who may dwell in the mountain of your consecration?

A consummate goer
and a producer of right
and a speaker with truth in his heart.

He hasn't footed upon his tongue,
he hasn't done bad to his friend,
and a taunt he hasn't lifted upon his neighbor.

A despisee in his eyes is rejected,
and fearers of Yahweh he substantiates.

He's sworn himself to be treated badly and he doesn't exchange.
His silver he hasn't given at interest.
And a bribe against the innocent he hasn't taken.

A doer of these things – he'll not be toppled for ineffable time."

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A couple additional things about the poem:

First, if it sounded familiar to you, it's probably because you've read translations of it before. It's known as Psalm 15 in the book of Psalms of the later tradition of the Hebrew Bible, and it is Psalm 14 in book of Psalms of the Greek Bible. Since the poem predates both collections and was originally an independent composition, I prefer to follow the ancient tradition of naming by the first line, in this case, "Yahweh, Who May Travel Into Your Tent?"

The other thing is that the above translation is my own translation, which, as I've mentioned in previous posts is called *Not A Bible Translation*.

|| May 2024 Update: There have been significant improvements to *Not A Bible Translation* as an

overall project since this post was published. Below is an updated translation of "Psalm 15." If you want to know why certain things are translated as they are, you can learn more about it in subsequent posts/podcasts. ?

he-who-do-his-thing, who sojourn in your tent?  
who dwell in the mountain of your restrictum?  
a consummate goer  
and a producer of right  
and a worder of truth in his heart.  
he ain't done footed upon his tongue,  
he ain't done work trouble for his friend,  
and a taunt he ain't done lift over his neighbor.  
a despisee in his eyes is rejected,  
and he substantiate fearers of he-who-do-his-thing.  
he done swore himself to be troubled and he not exchange,  
his silver he ain't done put forth at interest,  
and a bribe against the innocent he ain't done take.  
a worker of these not be toppled for ineffable time.

Psalm 15  
(Not A Bible Translation - NABT)

